THE EAGLES MAKE CALIFORNIA SOUNDS

by Joseph Rose

The Eagles: not an endangered rock 'n' roll species as far as they're concerned.

"Please help preserve the American Bald Eagle, our national symbol of freedom," says the message on the inside back cover of the Eagles' official program book. And although they can lay claim to the title of America's top rock and roll band with more substance than almost any other group, the Eagles sometimes seem to consider themselves as threatened as their namesake.

Why they should feel this way is difficult to see. After all, each of their albums has sold over a million copies, with the latest, "Hotel California," no exception. When they go on tour, they perform to sellout audiences in the 20,000 range in huge indoor arenas all over the world. It's safe to say they are one of the most popular bands in history.

But tell that to Don Henley, the vocalist - drummer - songwriter; Randy Meisner, the bassist - vocalist - songwriter; Joe Walsh, the guitarist - vocalist - songwriter; or J.D. Souther, the longtime friend and songwriting collaborator of the band. They're sitting around a coffee table in a hotel room around 2 a.m., and it's as if the wild ovations at the concert earlier that evening were for another band.

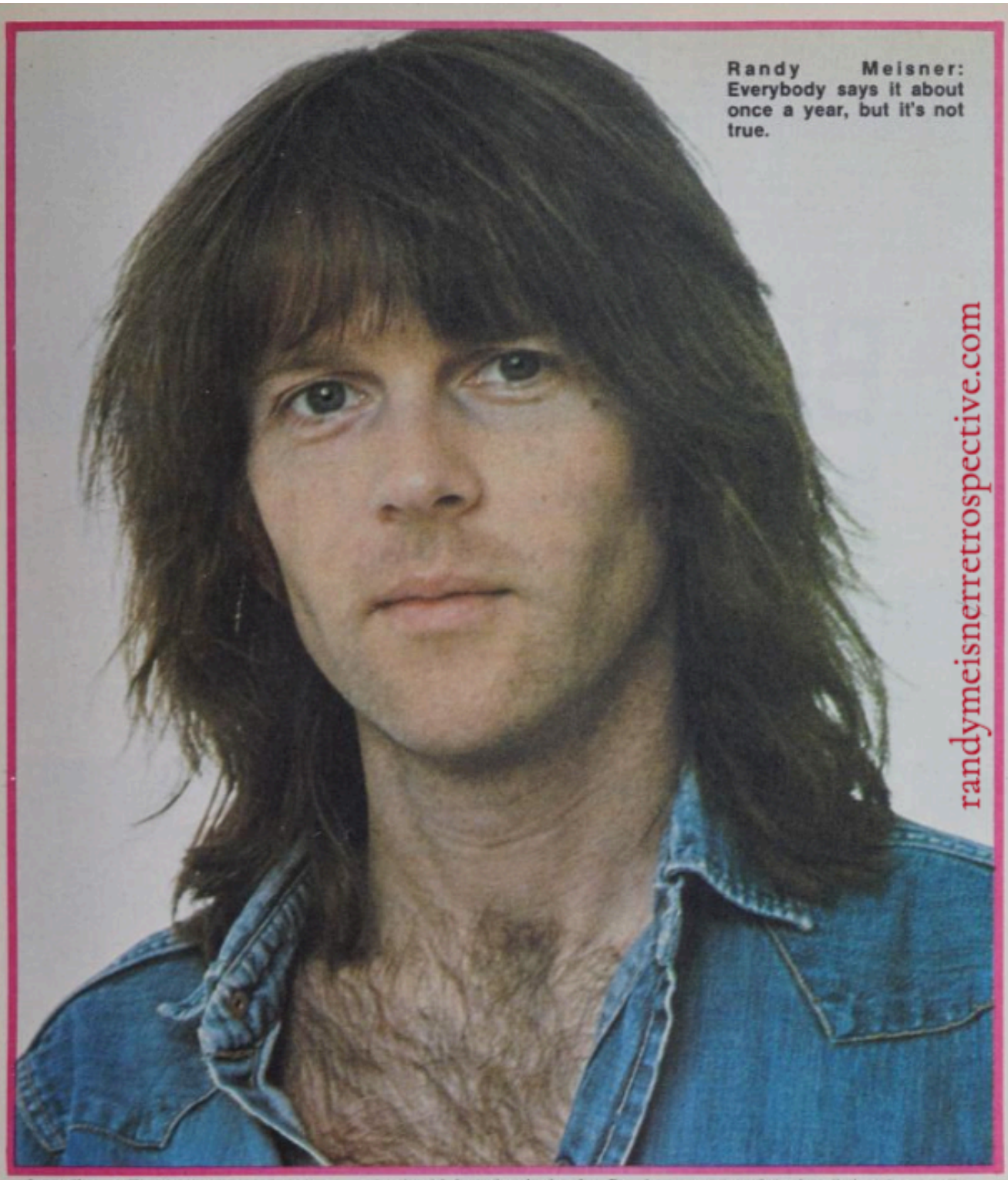
"With no personal references or anything," says Don Henley, looking right through me, "the press tends to - once you are established and no longer struggling, they tend to knock you a little bit more, I think, than when you are coming up."

"You're bigger targets," says J.D. Souther. "It's easier to take a shot at you."

"I mean, it's a pattern that I've seen time and again," continues Don, "even if you are as good as you were before. You always have to try to one-up yourself, it seems like, to stay in the good graces of the press."

I tried to put myself in the position of the eagles, with all their platinum albums, wealth, success and adulation, and I decided that I wouldn't care one fig about what the press wrote about me. But that's one of the many reasons I'm not in the Eagles. The Eagles do care — and care a lot — about the critics, about other musicians and bands, and about you, the reader. They care what you think. And the one thing they are most afraid of is that you might someday decide their songs aren't among the best, that their music isn't terrific, that they aren't what they used to be.

That's why they took more than a year and a half to make "Hotel California." The Eagles don't record albums, they sweat albums. They go over and over every tune, every syllable of the lyrics, polishing, changing, improving — until finally, reluctantly, they allow the recorded tapes to be sent to be converted



Randy Meisner: Everybody says it about once a year, but it's not true.

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into albums. Then they hold their collective breath to see what people will say.

They haven't been too happy with what critics in the east have had to say of late. "I think the east coast critics have taken out a personal vendetta on us," says Don, "because we've been represented as the California sound and we wear jeans and T-shirts and live out there in the sunshine. They tend to really write vicious personal attacks.

"I mean, someone just wrote a thing about us in one magazine that was uh ... didn't really have much to do with the music. It was more directed at us and what he thinks we're singing for. But that was all because we wouldn't let him in our concert. He came up in his white Rolls Royce, and since he'd never said a nice thing about us in his life, we decided to just not let him in. And he stood and screamed at the back door for an hour and a half or something like that and finally had his car towed away or something."

"He wrote some nice things about me, whew," says Joe Walsh. "He's trying to break up the group somehow."

Whether someone is trying to break up the Eagles or not, there are constant rumors of the band's imminent split.

"Yeah, everybody says that once a year," says Randy.

"Every two or three months," puts in Don. "Somebody in New York started a rumor that Joe was leaving and we were breaking up. And it got printed all over Australia and England and everywhere else."

The funny thing is that at the start the Eagles did look like a band that wouldn't stay together very long, because, at least onstage, each member seemed more

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conceited than the next. Don claims this was a defensive maneuver. "You've got to have a good attitude in this business period — if you want to survive. You've got to think you're good, because if you don't, boy, you'll get eaten alive.

"We liked being an opening act. In some ways the underdog position like that is a little bit easier to work from, because you only have to play for 50 minutes. You can put all your best stuff in and compact it into 50 minutes, 40 minutes or whatever you've got — and you can kick ass."

Recently, for the first time, the Eagles have started looking less interested in themselves onstage and more into their music. There is even a kind of jolliness and good feeling there.

"Jesus, don't write that," says J.D. "You'll wreck their image."

"It's been that way in the past year," says Don, "at least since Joe's been in the band. We still try to stay lean and hungry and not take too much for granted. Because it's harder to maintain it once you get there than it is coming up, and there are lots of other bands on the way up."

The Eagles, as the eastern critics point out, are a California band, and Glenn Frey opens each concert by saying something like, "Hello, we're the Eagles from Los Angeles." Only none of the Eagles is from Los Angeles. They come from Florida, Texas, Ohio, Nebraska and Michigan. What makes them so California?

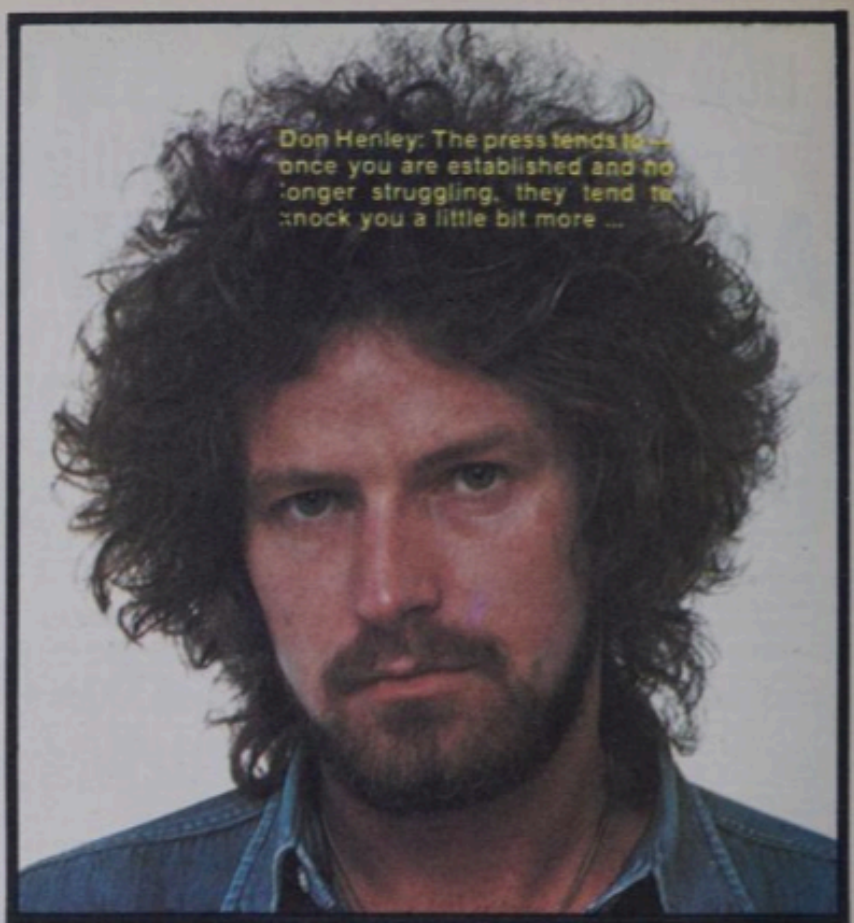
"But everybody in the music business in Los Angeles is from somewhere else," says Don. "That's what the California sound is: a culmination of the United States as a whole. The California sound is the American sound."

For the last several albums the Eagles have been writing about a life-style that has received the California label, too. As beautiful as the music may be, the lyrics are summed up in a line from one of their songs: "So you keep on singing after the thrill is gone." The songs seem to deal one way or another with empty, wasted lives. And maybe this is why all those rumors crop up.

The culmination of these devastated songs is the new "Hotel California," a concept album which comes right out and deals with Los Angeles in graphic terms. And the scene isn't a pretty one.

"We're not exactly going to make friends with this album," says Don, "but that's what it's about. We're just saying, 'Look what's happening.' I don't feel totally that way about California. I love it and I hate it at the same time."

There are a lot of mixed emotions about the Eagles. Perfectionists like they are can never be truly happy, and Henley has an ulcer to prove it. Perhaps one thing can comfort them: Their inner turmoil and creative agonizing has produced music that speaks to, and often brings solace to, millions. Let's wish them peace — and preservation. □



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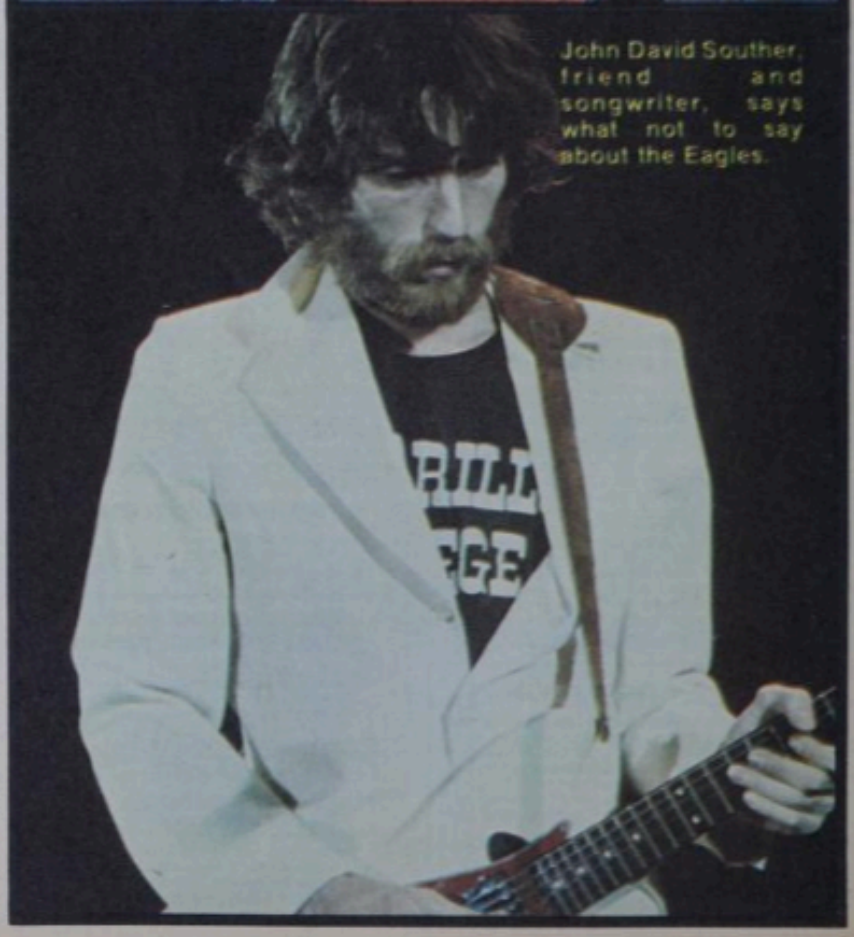

John David Souther, friend and songwriter, says what not to say about the Eagles.